AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS ON LOVE WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

THE FINAL STRAW RADIO

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Aishah Shahidah Simmonsis a writer, community organizer, prison abolitionist, and cultural worker who has done just an immense amount of work over the years to help disrupt and end the patterns of sexual abuse and assault within marginalized communities. In this interview we talk about a lot of things, her background and how she came to be doing the work shes doing right now, how better to think about concepts like accountability, what doing this work has been like for her as an out lesbian woman, and about her book *Love WITH Accountability, Digging Up the Roots of Childhood Sexual Abuse* which was published in 2019 from AK Press.

This interview feels very important right now, because we are in a time of overturn, tumult, stress, and uncertainty, and I think that in order for us to really be able to knuckle down and go in this for the long haul itll be imperative for our radical communities to take solid care of ourselves and of each other. I hope you get as much out of hearing Aishah's words as I did conducting and editing this interview.

Before we get started, as a content notice: we will be talking about some difficult topics in this interview. I will do my best to repeat this notice at regular intervals, but please do take care and treat yourself kindly (however that looks).
To keep up with Aishah, for updates on future projects and more:

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To support our guest, in a time where much if not all of her income is in peril:

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TFSR: This week I am very excited to present an interview done with Aishah Shahidah Simmons, who is a writer, community organizer, prison abolitionist, and cultural worker who has done just an immense amount of work over the years to help disrupt and end the patterns of sexual abuse and assault within marginalized communities. In this interview, we talk about a lot of things: her background and how she came to be doing the work she's doing right now; how to better think about concepts like accountability; doing the kind of work that she is doing as an out lesbian woman; and about her book *Love WITH Accountability: Digging up the Roots of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, which was published in 2019, from AK Press.

This interview feels really important for me right now, because we are at a time of overturn, of tumult, stress and uncertainty. And I think that in order for us to really be able to knuckle down and go in this for the long haul, it'll be imperative for our radical communities to take solid care of ourselves and of each other. I hope you get as much out of hearing Aishah's words as I did conducting and editing this interview.

Before we get started, as a content notice, we will be talking about some difficult topics in this interview. I will do my best to repeat this notice at regular intervals, but please do take care and treat yourself kindly however that looks. I let some words from Aishah's introduction to *Love WITH Accountability* lead us into the main interview.

Aishah Shahidah Simmons: The conscious breath can be a grounding anchor. It is in this context that I insert the word "breathe" in between every five chapters to invite you to pause, take conscious breaths, and ground yourself while reading. Whatever you decide, please take your time and please take compassionate care while reading, imagining and working for a world without violence. Breathe. This is sacred space.

My name is Aishah Shahidah Simmons. My pronouns are she and her. I am a culture worker, in terms of creating work that's used to, hopefully, make our culture and society better places to live in. And specifically, my work is on sexual violence, disrupting and ending rape, child sexual abuse. Focusing my center is in diasporic Black communities, because this is an international reality, sexual violence knows no boundary. I view it as work that transcends race, but very clear that my focus and my lens as a filmmaker, as a writer, are diasporic Black communities.

Before I could get to the anthology, I first started working not necessarily on child sexual abuse, but on sexual violence, through my film, *NO! The Rape Documentar*y that I spent 11 to 12 years making from 1994 to 2006. The film looks at sexual violence and accountability and healing in Black communities. And I start with *NO!* because *Love with Accountability*...without *NO!* I'm not sure *Love WITH Accountability* would exist. I am a child sexual abuse survivor, I'm also an adult rape survivor, I was raped my sophomore year in college. But while making *NO!* I couldn't really touch child sexual abuse. And both my parents are prominently featured in *NO!*, they did not sexually harm me at all, however they were bystanders to the abuse because I told them what happened.

I really think it's important because I think that when those of us who are able to break our silence around the harm that we've experienced in our lives, there's an assumption of like, "Oh, I could never do that. Oh, you're so strong" or xyz for anything, even while working on my film *NO!* I couldn't even touch my child sexual abuse, with all of the work. So for me, it just leads to the subtitle of *Love WITH Accountability* in terms of "digging up the roots of child sexual abuse", because, for me, I've fully believe that child sexual abuse is foundational to all forms of sexual violence.

It is mainly because it's for most of us the first places where we are violated and is the first place that we are taught to protect the institution known as "the family". So then over time as an institution ex-

pands to the church or the mosque or the synagogue or the temple, to the school, to the college university, to the activist organization, the community organization, to government. I think that it really begins at home and so that's why I just want to like in terms of just recognizing while I was doing, I hope, important work around addressing sexual violence committed against adults by adults predominantly, that I, even as a child sexual abuse survivor, couldn't even touch child sexual abuse until moving into this work called *Love WITH Accountability*.

I started the project in terms of recognizing that there isn't one answer, there isn't a one size fits all, that it's going to take multiple hands by multiple generations to address it. I really wanted to begin with an anthology, with a chorus of voices bringing a diversity of experiences, expertise, and ideas and visions about how we can not only disrupt it, but ultimately end it and how can we do it in a humane way that centers survivors -- the most immediate survivors, recognizing that many who caused the harm are also survivors -- without dehumanizing all those involved, but really inviting them in or calling them in to be accountable, and to change their behavior, and hopefully move towards a place where these things don't exist anymore.

I view myself as a prison abolitionist. But when I say "I view myself" there's viewing and being, and it's an exercise, I work at it every day. I don't believe that there's anyone who should be in prison, right? For me, it's: what does it mean, what does accountability look like outside of prisons? Sometimes what I've observed happening is that there's been a lot of kind of conversation on that, than it is around: how are we going to protect the children? How are we going to protect the survivors? I think it's a both-and, and not an either-or, and I think that our society has set it up is that it's either-or.

This is what excites me about the work that so many are doing around both transformative justice and also restorative justice. That people are really working towards both-and. We have to be mind-

ful about how do we center the survivors needs, right? That that doesn't get lost in conversations around ensuring that people are not harmed by the state. Like, and so I want to do both.

What we know is that communities of color, and specifically Black, Indigenous Latinx communities are disproportionately incarcerated, so we know that. And most of those folks are not incarcerated for having harmed the members in their community, right? So while most sexual harm is *intra*racial, meaning within the community, it tends to be the *inter*racial, outside of the community, sexual harm that gets the high profiles. And then it becomes like, what victims survivors get values, right who do we value more? And so we know that BIPOC -- Black Indigenous People of Color -- women, femmes, trans folks, that we are not valued. Our voices, our experiences are not valued. They're not valued in the criminal justice system and court of law so it becomes like, who gets prosecuted? What happens? So we just look at it that way, right?

And then in terms of the horrors that's going on in prison there are all these jokes, "oh, well, at least you gonna go to prison, like he's going to get prison justice." I can't stand it. It's so rooted in homophobia. It's just so barbaric. To me, somebody may have committed a heinous crime, but is that the response to then be heinous towards that person? Studies show that 40 to 45% of the rapes that occur in prison have been at the hands of *correctional* personnel. We're not talking about other inmates, that people are being abused and assaulted by correctional personnel. So if that is the case, who are you going to call? Who are you going to report that your body has been violated by the very people who are charged with quote, unquote, "guarding you"? There's no real therapy, therapeutic sources happening in prisons.

So just this notion -- unless somebody is doing life, which is horrific, and just completely inhumane -- that they're going to serve their time and then when they come out, what were they taught? Was there any training? Was there any understanding of what occurred?

I don't think that we arrived here on the planet as molesters of children, as rapists, I don't believe that. So what happened in their lives, that they started using violence in response, to either sexual desire, to power, to all these things, we have to understand that. And that requires a lot of work, and a lot of different types of resources. Because we know that the prison industrial complex is a multibillion dollar industry. So it's not about not having the resources. It's about what we choose to spend the resources on.

What would it be like if we created environments, they are healing spaces, where people understand the origins of the harm and heal from that, that is what we need. I want to transform society, I don't want crime and punishment. Yes, people need to be held accountable for the harm that they caused. Yes, we have to make sure that they don't continue to commit the harm. All of that. But I believe that we can do that, that is not punitive, that encourages all of us to call on our best selves.

We're in a very mean spirited society. And to be clear, this country was founded on rape, genocide, theft of land, theft of people. So you know, I don't want to act like "oh, this is a mean society because of the person, the occupant, in the White House right now," I'm not going to be a revisionist. We haven't really dealt with the origins of the fact that rape and genocide and theft is the very fiber, the very foundation, of not only this country, but all of the countries in the Americas and the Caribbean.

And Qui Alexander -- who is also one of the contributors to the anthology -- his piece is called *Thoughts on Discipline, Justice, Love and Accountability: Redefining Words to Reimagine Our Realities*, and Qui has done a lot of really important work working with the harm doers. I use "harm doers" and not "perpetrators" and that's very conscious. I credit restorative justice and transformative justice movements with my understanding of that. We're all learning and we're learning from each other. And it's on a continuum, it doesn't just happen. Because I used to say perpetrators I didn't think about

it like in terms of harm. We need all folks on deck in terms of like, we need those folks who are going to work specifically with the harm doers, like and that is their calling. That is the work in terms of really helping them to transform and do the work that needs to be done in response to the harm that they've caused. And then we need the folks who are focused on the most immediate survivors.

I think one of the things that I appreciate about Cyreé Jarelle's chapter is that they talk about what happens when you have disabilities. I mean Cyreé Jarelle talks about being autistic, and how they, how autistic children or children who have any forms of disorders, how they are, it's like, it's like "oh those poor parents". It's just like we don't see the children, so that even when they are being harmed, we don't even see it, when they are more susceptible than the child who doesn't have disabilities, when they are more susceptible to relying on care by providers who can also cause harm, and no one even really checking for them.

So just briefly, I was abused by my grandfather for two years. And I told my parents and they didn't remove me from the situation. There's the two years of the abuse. It ended, and the only reason I know I ended was because of hindsight. It ended but I still engaged with, loved, cared for, all of that, my grandfather. I'm 51 or will be. This started in '79 when I was 10. My grandfather became gravely ill in 2010. So we're talking about a long time of no accountability. Not only him but by my parents. I didn't seek any accountability from my grandfather.

It was a complicated thing where he became gravely ill and I played a role in saving his life. I was the person who was by his side and really advocating after a serious crisis occurred up until the point where my father and aunt were able to come. It was there that everything imploded for me, that was 2010. Then my grandpa became an ancestor and I did not go to his funeral. In 2015, I realized that not only was a grave injustice done to me by my grandfather, but that by my parents, who are really incredible human rights activists who've

been on frontlines of struggle, internationally, nationally for over 50 years. I share that to emphasize we have to really move beyond these kind of notions and ideas of who the bystanders are, who the harm doers are. Like, I find that so much it's like rooted and really classist, definitely racist, elitist versions of like, "oh, who does it".

I started reaching out to them -- they're divorced -- and signing my communiques "love WITH accountability" in the with was always all caps, so it'd be "love WITH accountability," because I was essentially saying "that while I love you, and I believe that you are love me that that love is not going to shield you from accountability." So that's where it came from, didn't, wasn't thinking about a project, wasn't thinking about anthology. In 2015, I was 46 years old and at that point, my film *NO!* had been out for, what, nine years?! And had been screened all over and translated and all of that, and was very much known as an antiviolence advocate. And again, I hone in on all of these things because I think that we have to really -- those of us who are survivors -- be kind and gentle with ourselves about when or if we're even able to face abuse. Because even with all of the work that I'd done -- and I was always out about being a rape survivors, especially -- I never could fully talk about my child sexual abuse. There was so much shame and I always thought it was because I was protecting Pop Pop, and I was protecting my grandfather, but I was really also protecting my parents.

I also want to say that my grandfather, like all of us, are complex. He took care of my grandmother, for 10 years when she had Alzheimer's. For 10 years. And he took care of her around the clock, it is *because of him* that she never set foot in a nursing home. And he did it almost single handedly. And I think that that played a role in my own silencing, right, because he was the hero who took care of my grandmother, and he was definitely my sexual terrorist. Again, these complexities.

I just really think about this in this era of Harvey Weinstein being sentenced to 23 years and Bill Cosby is in jail and R. Kelly's in

jail -- I don't know what's going to ultimately happen -- and not by any stretch of the imagination say that they should have not done horrific, unspeakable, outrageous, disgusting, inhumane things, to women and children. I want to be really, really clear. But I'm not really sure how prison is going to- what is prison doing? Each one of those men and all of the other people who have committed harm in our families, they don't do it alone. There is a whole culture that surrounds them that enable them to do it.

So for me, my parents didn't stop it. I told, for all the people, the survivors, that we hear, I'm just thinking about celebrities, people told and nothing was done, because people were making money, whatever, all the reasons. And so this notion of "Yay, Harvey is going to go to jail for 23 years." I'm like, "who are all the people that allowed it to happen for decades?" Like and there is another Harvey Weinstein right now as we speak, happening, that we don't even know about. So it's like if we don't really tackle the issues of who's committing the immediate harm, but also all the people that are surrounding it, and then to think that therefore we can lock up everybody? Like, we'd be locking up most people, because all of us have, indirectly, even myself! I have to think about what are the ways in which I have indirectly allowed harm to occur, let alone the harm that I have caused, not sexual harm, but the harm I've caused my friends, my loved ones, that we make these people monsters, rather than saying no people commit monstrous acts.

What's really important is that we understand that healing is a journey, and it's not a destination. That's the first and key thing particularly with CSA -- child sexual abuse -- and even rape but definitely in child sexual abuse and even if you haven't come to grips with it until being an adult like, it's so layered, right? The other thing, and this is something I am constantly learning and relearning, is that healing cannot be contingent on someone being accountable to you for the harm that they've caused. Because there are so many instances where that will never happen. Either because they died, because they said "I didn't do it". In Indigenous communities in this

country and elsewhere, it's like, in terms of the laws and Indigenous communities, so much of the harm happens externally, right? And then those people who are white are not even held accountable. Tribal law is outside of the US Justice System. I bring that up -- and I don't know a lot so I'm not going to stay there, because there's nothing worse than talking about something you don't fully understand, and particularly not being a member of particular Indigenous nations -- I bring that up to say that, I've heard many Indigenous women saying that "we have to focus on healing, and doesn't mean that we don't continue to fight and seek justice and accountability. But we have to focus on healing." I would offer that that is the case for most of us in marginalized communities, right?

Again, like we know, the criminal justice system is flawed. We're not even seen as being capable of being raped or molested, as children or as adults. It's just not, we're not even seen as the victims, so to speak. So we can't rely on institutions and structures that don't even see our humanity. That we have to rely on our own practices and cultures, many of which we've not had access to, because of enslavement, because of genocide, because of colonialism, because of forced migration. But then there's so many of us where we are relearning and tapping into methods and modalities.

I believe, for me, I don't know where I would be without therapy. I've been very, very fortunate to be able to work with a Black feminist psychologist who supported my healing journey by making her fees accessible to what I could afford, and sometimes what I could afford was single digits, literally. I practice meditation, that has been very powerful for me in terms of focusing on intentional and conscious breath, particularly in periods of rage and periods of sadness, to let my breath be an anchor. And "intentional" because we're always breathing, until we don't breathe. Being in community with other survivors who are working on healing, as a reminder that I'm not alone, I'm not the only person who's experienced the harm. I don't have to do this work alone. That I think that there are ways in which how we kind of come together around all kinds

of really important political issues, and really trying to change our society -- the political system, the criminal justice system -- that we also have to make space to come together as survivors.

I think bystanders and harm doers have to do that work as well. I say this as a survivor, but also recognizing that I want all of us well. I want all of us well because I really want us to co-create a world where there will one day be children who look back and say, "they did that?"

This is why I call upon my comrade, my friend, my sister, Walida Imarisha, who talks about the power of speculative fiction. That is envisioning the world that doesn't exist. So often we're like "no to this, no to that", and we have to, right? We gotta resist, we gotta say "no cops in the schools, no prisons" "no rape", but we also have to do that work of envisioning. When we think about all of us, in terms of our ancestors, we are the result of speculative fiction, particularly those of us who come from marginalized communities. That our ancestors before us didn't know that I wouldn't be here doing this work, but it is because of the choices that they made, good and bad [laughs], that I am here. So for me, I'm definitely wanting it to change right now in this instance. But I want to think about the generations that I don't know I'm on that long distance, intergenerational run. I think that if we think of it that way, then we can really come up with some, just incredible visions, and then begin to do that work. As long as we're trying to do that "one size fits all" instantaneous we're going to end it in one generation, how?! When we've got so many generations behind us. Like, how are we going to do that? And maybe if you can show me how we're going to do it, great! I'm not saying we can't do it, but don't do it in a way that cuts off someone on the margin, because it doesn't work with our quick program.

TFSR: And the one size fits all approach has is the thing that got us here in the first place.

AS: Exactly. Exactly. So *NO!* focuses on sexual violence committed against cisgender Black women and girls by cisgender Black men and boys. So for me rape was something that happened to cis women at the hands of cis men. Period. Like, and I think it's really important to share that, because to talk about the evolution...so often people share where they are in this moment, but they don't talk about the process to get where they are. So for me, my vision for *Love WITH Accountability* expanded because of my understanding that sexual violence knows no boundary. It's not about a gender. It is about human. So that trans children, gender nonbinary, men, boys, all are being harmed, and women commit sexual harm so we have to kind of move beyond that. We can talk about "Yes, the majority of the numbers that have been reported", but new studies are coming out, for instance, that you know, gender nonconforming, gender non-binary and transgender children are the most susceptible to sexual violence.

Love WITH Accountability is not as expansive as I would like it to be. But I created a wider net, in terms of the perspectives that we hear, that we're hearing from deaf survivors, from autistic survivors, from cis Black women survivors, cis Black men, trans men, gender nonbinary folks, because it was just to really encourage people to think beyond a binary. To understand that, particularly, as diasporic Black people, we know racism. Like, we know it. But then to say, we also have to know ableism, we have to look at the ways in which we are marginalizing within ourselves. We have to look at transphobia, how we are marginalizing within ourselves, so that it's not enough to solely focus on racism, because if racism ended right now, we're not safe. Most of us in our communities are not safe. And I want racism and white supremacy to end yesterday. But I don't fool myself to think that once that happens, I'm going to be okay. That's not true.

TFSR: I just really loved, specifically in your introduction that you wrote to this book, you were like, very compassionately diligent with just naming all of the isms: ableism, transphobia,

racism, transmisogynoir, misogynoir, all of these things. And I think that that's very, very key to further understanding the thing that we're going through.

AS: Yeah, I viewed my introduction as like what I called "word libation". Instead of pouring water on the ground, putting words on the page to really set a context, starting from the beginning since Columbus came over here -- to this hemisphere in 1492 -- to really ground that what we're trying to undo- and I don't want to romanticize and be like, "oh, there was no rape in Africa or India," I'm not saying that at all, but in terms of this reality, in this hemisphere, we have to be aware of this continuum of violence, from the moment that the Europeans set foot here. Tragically, they couldn't cohabitate with love...with love and accountability! *laughs* And so that because it's so easy to be like, "oh, Trump, is this or that person is that" and yes, he is, but he is a product of this continuum. An\d even how we treat each other and ourselves is such a product of white supremacy, of capitalism, misogynoir, misogyny, ableism, audism, you know? Like we have to understand it, that doesn't let anyone off the hook from saying, "Oh, well, because of that, that's why they committed harm." No, no, no, it's not excusing it, but it is to have a broader context. And I think that when we do that, then we have to say, "what are we doing with prisons? Like what the hell?" You know, when we really understand the whole context it's like, no, that's not the solution.

We're creating the Good Guys, Bad Guys. As long as we do that, we'll never see the harm doers amongst us, right? Because when our person, the person that we love, the person that we know, that we trust, when they have been accused or have committed harm, we won't want to believe that because "harm doers are monsters." But if we can see that harm doers are people who commit monstrous acts, who are dealing with their own fragilities and their own pain and trauma -- that again, doesn't mean not focusing on what they've done -- but if we can see that, we understand that this is why it's so pervasive.

I feel like we need multiple teams. Like for me, my work is not to necessarily work with the harm doers, or bystanders, that's not my strength. I want to work with survivors. But there are people who do want to do the work with the harm doors. I think that that is critical, we have to have that, in a way so that the survivors, immediate survivors, don't feel like they are being sidelined. It's hard work, I'm still - my mother is a contributor to the anthology, and she writes about how she did not protect me. She is the only public bystander in the book being accountable. I have to say, I'm on the journey with my parents, both of them, in very different ways. I recently just shared because it's like stop and go, and it's very painful, you know cuz I do, I still get very angry, and I'm hurt. I think particularly for my mom who's like, really trying and she feels like nothing she can do is enough. All of that is real. I just had an epiphany, I said, "you know, mom, we're dealing with 40 years of trauma it's not even with all the progress that we've made -- and we've made a lot of progress -- it's not gonna...40 years versus 3 years of us doing this work *laughs*, you know what I'm saying? My parents are incredible in terms of they get it, they, they they want, we talk about reparations, we talk about all of these things that we understand we've got to undo centuries of this and that, but then it's like, it gets hard when it becomes like, how do we undo this harm? Right?

I mean, and I know for myself I've caused harm. I've caused harm to my brother, who is nine years younger than me. So that means he was one when I started being abused as a child. There's a saying that Alice Walker said and it's very heteronormative, I wanna say that, but it's like, "the husband beats the wife, the wife beats the child, the child beats the dog". It becomes like, we abuse those who are less powerful. I say that in terms of my brother, like I was being abused, no one was taking-no one rescued me, so then I took it out on my brother and there's kind of a legacy of that. He and I unpacking that and doing that work. I mean, we're good and grown now. But just me even thinking about the impact of the harm that I caused as a child who was being harmed. That's why I said, it's like, everybody's been- we're responding to our harm. That stuff is hard. It's hard.

I'm not a parent and I have so much remorse about the harm. I'm not talking about the little Aishah, I'm talking about, like how that legacy continued well into adulthood.

So being accountable in those ways...this is hard work. I think that that's why so many people are like "just lock them up, throw away the key", because it's not easy for the person who is locked up, but it's easy for us because it's like, we don't have to think about it anymore. Well they're gone, Harvey Weinstein's in jail. Like, you know? We don't have to think about, well, wait a minute, what happened here?

TFSR: I'm wondering like, how this, how doing this work has been for you and your daily life? What kinds of responses have you gotten to *NO! The Rape Documentary* and to *Love WITH Accountability* and to your other work?

AS: Thank you for that question. I, um...I'm gonna say it's hard. I'm gonna just put myself out there and say that this is hard work. I don't know where I would be without therapy and meditation. So and my partner Sheila has been, she's been a Rock of Gibraltar, and has had my community of kindred spirits and friends. And my brother, and you know, the work I'm trying to do with my parents, my parents are trying to do with me, and it's taken its toll. What I will say that *NO!* was different, because I'm not in *NO!* I would offer that I'm throughout *NO!* I am a rape survivor. But I'm not in *NO!* My testimony is not in there, at all. So there was a way that I think I had a barrier, as opposed to *Love WITH Accountability*. I write I'm in it. I talk about my abuse in the introduction. My mother, then she's the first chapter, she talks about how she didn't protect me. So it's there. And in addition to that, I'm very, I'm digging up the roots, I'm digging up the roots in my own life. So it's a lot harder than *NO!* and I struggle.

My PTSD comes up. My complex PTSD comes up, it definitely comes up and I go through periods of rage I'm sad, I'm depressed.

All of that, because of therapy, because of meditation, because I have tools. I'm aware like, "Oh, this is coming up". I have community who are like, "I'm checking on you, I haven't heard from you. What's going on? Are you okay?" You know and then I think, like really trying to embody what I'm talking about, in terms of love with accountability, rage, meditation, action, healing really remind I tell people "take a breath when you get upset" and then I try, I have to remind myself like that, just step back, give yourself some breathing room. So it's hard, and I can't imagine doing anything else. I made *NO!* to save all those Black women survivors out there and in making *NO!* I saved my life, because it was making *NO!* that led me to *Love WITH Accountability*.

When I started working on *NO!* I was 25, it was 1994, I was a filmmaker. Like, *NO!* it was just gonna be this quick project, and then I thought I was going to Hollywood! This is pre- you know, Netflix, pre-anything. *NO!* took 11 years because no one wanted to fund a film about sexual violence and healing, committed against Black cis women. HBO turned me down, PBS turned me down, Sundance... no one was interested. So it's very fascinating to me, right? Like, this is not the trajectory. But then doing *NO!* then led to this work. I mean, my grandfather, and then I wrote an essay in this important text called *Queer Anthology: Queering Sexual Violence, Radical Voices from Within the Antiviolence Movement*, edited by Jennifer Patterson. And so she invited me to write a chapter in 2010, it was right when my grandfather became ill. I didn't get into all the deep details in that -- I touched on it in *Love WITH Accountability* -- but that led to this work, to the *Love WITH Accountability* work. So it's really it's one of those things is like: is life imitating art, is art imitating life? And I think that for so many of the people in *NO!*, the survivors, the activists featured in the film, and then definitely the folks in *Love WITH Accountability*, this may not be their sole work, but it is definitely a part of the commitment in terms of their work. It's like, we know this horror, we lived with it and we don't want it to happen anymore, you know.

I just found out that *Love WITH Accountability* was named a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Awards. We'll find out on June 8, if it actually wins. But I'm just honored that it was selected as a finalist. I'm really, really honored about that. The Noname Book Club, they selected *Love WITH Accountability* as one of the two books for March. And why it's so important for me is that my teacher, Tony Cade Bambara, it's the community you want to name you. It's the community you are accountable for. That's the things I always had to fall back on with *NO!* like, because I didn't get this big grant or I didn't get -- while making it, ultimately, I did get a big grant that made it accessible in terms of translation, captioning, from Ford -- but it just took a long time. The blessing about all that was that I could, I made my film. I didn't have to meet the rules or regulations of the big funders, right? Because I'm not accountable to the funders, I was accountable to the community.

And so why I'm excited about Noname Book Club naming *Love WITH Accountability* is because it was selected by a brother named Dawud Lee, and he is the facilitator of SCI Coal Township prison chapter. This brother, if he says he's innocent I believe he's innocent. Based on his case, and what I've read, it just seems like another form of railroading another person in prison -- particularly Black body -- in prison, because it's not just Black men, it's Black cis women, Black trans women that are disproportionate in prison. And the fact that A) that there's been access to books, because for many prisoners, they're not even getting access to books in prison. That this book was chosen, as a resource, as a pick, like that just, for me, back to Tony Cade Bambara, is just like, the community you want to name you. That, for me, is really important. That he, and Noname Book Club -- which is really picking up radical and revolutionary books -- and committing to send them out to inmates to marginalized communities throughout this country. That this book is a book that they're lifting up as a resource and a tool is just like, wow, this is powerful.

I am working on another book project, another book project called

From Love to Justice. I'm really going in, in terms of, I have historically curated and collected and shared the wisdom of, I guess now total of about 70 survivors, advocate, scholars, all diasporic Black, around addressing adult sexual violence and child sexual violence, and while I'm a part of the, clearly, a part of the work, I want to hone in on what I've learned and shared that as as a resources as an intervention. So that's my next project.

In terms of reaching me for I have two websites, there's **NoTheRapeDocumentary.org** and **LoveWithAccountability.com**. So those are the two websites that focus on those two bodies of work. I'm on social media, on Twitter and Instagram **@afrolez**, that's A-F-R-O-L-E-Z. There is a *Love WITH Accountability* Facebook page. I have an Aishah Shahidah Simmons cultural worker Facebook page, and then there's a *Love WITH Accountability* Instagram page and a Love Accountably Twitter page, but usually like, if you go to notherapedocumentary.org or lovewithaccountability.com, the social media handles are there.

And AfroLez is like, my name [laughs delightedly]. It's something that I came up, developed, in 1992 when I was a very young baby dyke, 23, and it was my downpayment on the future. Because I was like, this radical, raging dyke and I was happy and very proud of it. And people were, particularly elders, like elders like my age -- and I'm like, "Oh, my God, I'm an elder" -- but yeah, I would say, "Oh, yeah, when I was young, I used to be like that, but you know, you'll mellow out". And so little Aishah or young adult Aishah -- [laughing] I'm being pejorative to me, not to anybody else who's 23 -- was just like "*NO!*!!" And so I created Afro Lez. And I have to tell you there was some part of me that knew because there are times when I'm just like, "Oh, my God!" because it's very, it's part of my whole thing. It's AfroLez Productions, it's AfroLez-it's everywhere!. In terms of me my identity. And I've had people say, "is that AfroLez?" (pronounced "lay") You know, it's like, there are those times when, because I don't feel safe, it's like, "Okay, I'm dealing with rape now I got to also come out about being gay?" it's like all of that. And I was

like, "Oh, yeah, 23 Aishah knew".

So it's my constant accountability about like, "no, you're not hiding" in terms of that. And because it has been hard at times, because it gets into the, "oh, is that why you've been raped?" Or because everybody's always trying to pathologize us about our sexual identity-sexuality, or gender identity. At the end of the day, all they're doing is they're saying "your sexuality is wrong", or "your gender identity is wrong, and I need to get to the root of it". Because they're not really concerned about if I've been raped or not. It's like, "Oh, is that why?" And this is like, really? So now, I mean, I love AfroLez. I definitely, I love AfroLez.

But it's just, it's funny, in terms of that. Even now, like in contemporary people, because I always say I'm a Black feminist lesbian. For me, it's really, all those identities are very important. People will want to drop lesbian before they'll drop feminist. It's very fascinating. Very, I mean, it's not fascinating, it's homophobia. But I mean it's, it's interesting. I learned that from -- I didn't know her -- but I learned that from Audrey Lorde. Where would I be if I didn't know the people who identified as lesbian. So I mean, I'm out from my own survival, but I'm also out for people to know "I'm here", you know? I'm here. I'm here. My dad used to always say that, "you have to let people know you're in the room so that they know they're not alone". And so because I have the privilege -- unfortunately it is a privilege in this society -- to be able to say, "I've been raped. I've been molested. I'm a dyke." I believe I have a responsibility.

TFSR: Absolutely. I resonated with that so much, in in your introduction and what you just said, because as somebody who is also like a survivor of childhood sexual assault and adulthood sexual assault, and as a queer, trans man, I hear this just all the time. And you're like, "No, no. I believe I would have been a queer trans man had none of this happened." This is not, don't pathologize people's sexuality, their gender identity, all of these things and don't weaponize something that is so rooted in trauma for

the individual, and trauma for communities to be homophobic or transphobic. Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for that.

AS: And you know what I'm so glad about? Not that I need this, but I have journals. I used to keep journals when I was a kid. And when I was like, before my molestation, I created a list of people I was like, "I don't know if I'm gonna marry a woman or man," or "girl or boy" is what I wrote as a kid. So, you know what I'm saying? Like, I was just like, "Yeah, I was always queer, and it doesn't matter!" Let's just say, let's say I wasn't always clear, it doesn't matter. Like, just, I'm gay now. It doesn't matter. We don't have to understand how-how did you get that way? Why are you straight?

TFSR: Do you see the look, see the look on people's faces if you ever posed that question? Like it is, is...it just blows people's minds.

AS: It really does.

TFSR: Straight is not the default. You know?

AS: Exactly.

TFSR: Most, most people think of themselves as straight, but straight is not the default, it's a colonial construct.

AS: It really is, and what would happen if people had the space to be who they were, you know what I'm saying? Like if...would people really -- consensually and safely, let's be very clear -- live it all out? Would they really? Would they be? You know, those are the questions and we just don't know. That's what excites me about the young people -- like, young young, I mean you know, not even, nowhere near 18 -- because there's studies are showing there are many more young people who don't identify as straight, you know? That there's just a space and a freedom for them, which I think is the fear of the Right. I mean, that's a whole other conversation [laughs].

TFSR: A fear of the young on the part of establishment, folks we see, every single generation has some kind of problem with young people. It was tongue clicking, it was vocal fry, it's the skinny jeans, it's all of these things, and it's just like, "no, you're just afraid of growth, and you're just afraid of this world not feeling like your own" and you know what, that's legitimate that's fine. But like, please don't demonize people about it. People are learning and growing, and like, not being so straight and I'm here for it personally, you know?

AS: Mhm, me too. It's a fear of change, is really a fear, you know? And ultimately -- you know, me getting all esoteric -- it's a fear of death. You know, I don't, I've yet to -- and probably will never -- learn Snapchat, right? Because I was like, I just can't do it-

TFSR: [laughs] Same.

AS: [cracking up] I'm like, I'm doing Instagram, I'm on Twitter, I just can't. I'm sure I could, but it's just like, it becomes a comfort zone, right? So then you, we all just want to keep it this, this way. I think then I think it's extra intense in this country, where we're really monolingual, or not as a country we're not monolingual, but the way it's enforced being monolingual. It's happening elsewhere, though, I mean, you see what's happening in India with the new prime minister. I mean, it's just, it's everywhere. It's just the rise of fascism, it's really scary, cause we keep talking about change, but I'm just like, "we're like, it's almost like the turn of the century is repeating itself. It's like we're in 1920!" Like the rise of fascism, it's just, it's, it's frightening.

TFSR: And also, we're dealing with a global pandemic too these days-

AS: Exactly.

TFSR: -which is a whole other, sort of, how it's interfacing with

capitalism with the prison system.

AS: Exactly. Then this whole kind of Yellow Peril thing, you know? Just the racism towards it's just as disgusting. You know, last year was the second hottest year ever. Then there are all these viruses that are frozen, or were frozen that's what was keeping us all safe. So as things melt, other viruses are going to be coming up. It's scary. Then people talk about revolution -- I'm not talking about this kind of the craziness that the pundits do like, *mocking voice* "oh, we're gonna have a revolution." I was like, "You all don't, that's not, that's not how, you don't have a revolution at the *starts cracking up* ballot box necessarily"-- but even with a talk about revolution, as a feminine femme identified survivor, queer, Black, anti-gun, prison abolitionist...I don't feel like I'm safe. You know I'm not safe you know revolution doesn't necessarily make me feel safe -- not that I want this craziness that we're in -- but it's just kind of like, it's just, it doesn't feel safe. Everybody has guns, like it's just I, I have a lot of concerns about where we're all headed as a nation. Which is all the more reason why this work matters so much, because I want to feel safe in my community. I don't necessarily, right? And we all know about "the outsider coming in for us" -- and we can define how the outsider is -- I want to feel safe with the insiders on the inside.

TFSR: That is such a good reframing of that, though, of the issue of safety in a time of increasing, escalating instability.

AS: And that's the work I think that you know, I feel like *Love WITH Accountability* tries to do in tandem of what so many people are doing on the ground. As a cultural worker, I want my contribution, I hope, is the work that I produce as resources and tools. I learn also from what's being done on the ground. So those are things for me, that's really important. I think that it's hard for us to talk about child sexual abuse. Not that it's easy to talk about police brutality, it's not. But it's "easy" only in the sense that we can identify the quote unquote, "enemy", right? It's the outsider, it's that cop. It's that white vigilante. What do we do when it's the leader of our movement, or

it's our father or our sister, you know what I'm saying? That so much more complicated. That's the stuff that, for better or for worse, I'm drawn to I don't know. *cracks up*

TFSR: It's hard and it childhood sexual assault and rape still exists within this sort of lattice or network of silence. I think that there are some really badass people, yourself included, who are trying to fly against that tendency that people have to just brush it under the rug or not talk about it or anything, because that's not, that's just not how we're going to move forward. And we can't move forward until things are right at home. You know?

AS: Yeah, I agree. That's how in the opening of the book, I use two quotes from "the Tony's", I call them, Tony Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison. Bambara says "if your house ain't in order, you ain't in order. It's so much easier to be out there than right here". Then Tony Morrison wrote, "what you do to children matters, and they might never forget." I think that we have to understand that because a lot of us are wounded healers, are wounded leaders, and unbeknownst to us, if we're not doing some form of therapy, or healing or something, we're replicating. We're replicating that which was done to us.

It's not necessarily sexual it's not like, "Oh, I was abused, sexually abused, I'm sexually abusing someone". No, no, no, there are other ways in which we can replicate the behavior. So we have to be mindful though because we want to create healthy movements, we want to create healthy societies.

TFSR: And I think that the only thing that's gunna push us through these times of escalating instability are the health of our communities. Like, I think that we are gonna be really tested.

AS: You're right, we are so tested. I mean, I've just like, as an independent contractor, my livelihood is based on speaking engagements, all, everything, it's just a twinkling of an eye. It's all gone, right? For now, at least. We don't know, right? And so I'm just like,

"how am I gonna live?" Like literally, I don't know, right this second. There's no socialized medicine, there's no social program, there's nothing in the way in which other countries have, specifically Europeans.

Then we are -- the way in which our societies are such, right, this society, US society -- so many of us are disconnected, maybe by choice, and also by situation, like from family of origin, or community, you know? It's like we have to create these networks of care. Which is what alicia sanchez gill -- actually, that's the name of her chapters -- *Networks of Care*. We have to, we have to do that. And in order to do that, we've got to be safe and loving and caring and accountable with each other in those communities.

TFSR: Are there ways that listeners can help support you? Is that something that you'd like to throw out here?

AS: Oh! I hadn't, I mean, I haven't thought about that *bursts into laughter* I welcome it! I would like that. If you look up **@AfroLez-Productions** on PayPal, it's there, Aishah Simmons but it's AfroLez-Productions. And then Venmo, **@AfroLez** and Cashapp it's **$AfroLez**. So I hadn't thought about that because I'm not a 501(c)(3), a nonprofit or any of that, I hadn't even thought about asking or trying to seek donations. So thank you for that offer.

Fortunately, it's just me "me", I mean I have a partner, but meaning I don't have kids. I don't know what I would do if I was responsible for children. And I'm thinking about all of the frontline workers and you know, the restaurant industry. I mean what's happening? I don't want this situation to bring out the worst in us and it's just the racism, the xenophobia, the transphobia, homophobia, the guns that are just everywhere I'm scared. I feel like, "Oh, my God, are we in an Octavia Butler novel? Are we in *Parable of the Sower*?" like I'm really a little nervous about where this is all going. That's my fear. So all the more reason why we have to be compassionate and loving with each other and ourselves.

I think, I think the big thing is to take care. To take care of ourselves and take care of each other and, and the planet. The planet. We can't, this is our home. We can't live without the planet. I don't know what people are thinking, and the powers that be, but we have to take care of the planet. And breathe. Intentional breath. Take time -- because people can't go on retreats and nobody wants to go on a retreat at this point anyway -- but just to connect to your source.

TFSR: It's amazing to me how many people are going through life holding their breath. I think that many of us who are marginalized by capitalism, by racism, by white supremacy, by hetero patriarchy I think so many people go through their life just braced for the next thing, which is really real, but sometimes it's great to allow your body to just breathe.

AS: And that's something that you, we can all do. And I really, I credit Ericka Huggins, who was a Black Panther, and an educator and teacher and just incredible human who was incarcerated with a newborn. On trial for murder. I share this because she talked about how she taught herself to meditate and that's what got her through solitary confinement. They can take our breath away, as Eric Garner, we know that, but until they do that, they can't take that innate power. That is our own. Easier said than done, but I'm just talking about our wage jobs, our salary jobs that you know, all of these things...they cannot take that power away.

TFSR: If you are interested in seeing more work from Aishah, visit our blog post at TheFinalStrawRadio.noblogs.org or scroll down to the show notes if you're listening on your phone. We will post all the links in those places. If you're interested in reading her book *Love WITH Accountability*, visit AKPress.org for more information

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